

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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DAMIAN HINDS

AM: Damian Hinds, can I start by asking you, only semi-satirically, whether you have noticed the European election campaign is on?

DH: Well, I have. I mean, truth be told, Andrew, you know, in previous European elections it hasn't been the highest profile of political events compared to other elections. Of course, we just had the local elections as well, a lot of us have been out campaigning on those.

AM: Seriously, are you going to have a launch – are you going to launch your campaign?

DH: I'm not sure we need a launch. I mean, we've been very clear about the outcome that we want. We're leaving the European Union. We need to make sure we do it with a deal. But we don't actually want MEPs to be having to take their seats. We want people to vote Conservative – I always want people to vote Conservative. But I actually don't want the people who are elected to have to take up position.

AM: So no launch. When are we going to see your manifesto?

DH: I can give you the manifesto now if you like.

AM: No, I'd like to see it on a piece of paper.

DH: It doesn't take a very large piece of paper to say what our approach is. We want to make sure we leave the European Union, we do it as soon as possible and we do it with a good, negotiated exit deal which is good for people's jobs and livelihoods.

AM: But if I'm standing on the doorstep and I'm approached by a Tory MEP candidate, I might want to know what they want to do as an MEP if they have to take their seats, which they might very well have to do.

There's a whole set of really big European issues coming up over the next few years, and without a manifesto I've absolutely no idea what the Tories will be standing for. None.

DH: Well, our plan is very, very clear. We should have left the European Union already. We didn't manage to do that because there haven't been enough votes in Parliament to do it. But we are going to do it as soon as possible. We need to make sure we do it with a good deal. And yeah, you're right, by the way, there are lots of big European issues coming up and that's one of the reasons it's important we have a close future relationship with the European Union, because we have a lot of interests in common. We have to work together, of course, on a lot of stuff. But that isn't about taking up positions in the European Parliament, because we're leaving the European Union.

AM: It would be quite nice to know what your policies were, however. And given what's happening in these election campaigns so far, you've seen the polls as well as everybody else – it's pretty clear why the Tory party didn't want them to happen.

According to Conservative Home, a survey by your own Conservative Home, 62 per cent of Tory members say they will back Nigel Farage's Brexit Party at this coming election, and 40 per cent of Tory councillors – elected Tory councillors – are also going to vote for the Brexit Party. What do you say to them?

DH: Well, I don't think anyone's in any doubt these are going to be difficult elections for us. That much has been clear from the very start. I mean, look, for some people this is the ultimate

protest vote opportunity. Actually turnouts tend to be quite low in European elections anyway –

AM: But they've been very important politically

DH: - and people do use it as something of a free vote. I think that's going to be even more true this time. Actually, ironically, this is in a sense, for some people it is a second referendum. But actually, you know, the important thing actually is if you want to cast your vote to say I want to leave the European Union, do it now and do it with a good negotiated exit deal, then vote Conservative.

AM: If it's a second referendum, even some of your own MPs are thinking about not voting for you. Even some of your own MPs. Maria Caulfield was asked this week, would she vote for Mr Farage's Brexit Party? She replied: 'I don't know. I will wait and see what the candidates are and make my decision then. I may not vote at all.' If Tory MPs can't be persuaded to vote Tory why should anybody else?

DH: Well, some people may be reconsidering their support for the Nigel Farage party, perhaps, after what they have seen this morning. My encouragement is, look, we are a party which is very firmly determined to make sure we leave the European Union, we do it quickly, and we do it well. And so I encourage people to vote Conservative.

AM: As a government, as a Cabinet, your strategy now relies first on these talks with the Labour Party. But Sir Graham Brady of the '22 Committee has said these talks are petering out, and you read the papers this morning, there's a lot of pessimism about them.

DH: Well, I'd rather we hadn't had to go into talks with the Labour Party. I voted consistently since the morning after the

referendum, I've been committed to and have voted in Parliament repeatedly to make sure we leave the European Union. The problem, Andrew, as you know well, is that there hasn't been a majority to do that. And in fact of all the different options that people have put forward - and there's no shortage of options, there's at least eight different ways that you could leave the European Union - they've all got their cheerleaders, but none of them have a majority. And the reality of living in a parliamentary democracy, and by the way, thank god that we do, the reality of that is that you need the votes in Parliament to be able to move forward.

AM: Gavin Williamson, who until recently was sitting beside you in Cabinet, has described these as a betrayal and incredibly naive, these talks.

DH: Well, what's the alternative? We have to find a way through. That means you have to get a majority. We haven't - although 90 per cent, actually, of Conservative MPs have voted in favour of the UK's negotiated deal - that hasn't been enough to get it over the line. The reality is you need those votes to do it. And I disagree with Labour on many, many things, and with Jeremy Corbyn on even more, but there is some commonality of interest here. We do both need to get it done. Because actually this isn't just about parties or individuals, this is about our democracy. It's about our system. And to repay the trust that people put in us we need to get things done on behalf of our constituents.

AM: The problem the Labour Party has in these talks was very eloquently explained by John McDonnell when he was in that chair last week. He said: 'We're dealing with a very unstable government, it's like trying to enter into a contract with a company that's going into administration, and the people who are going to take over are not willing to fulfil that contract,' (and we

all know what we're talking about), "We cannot negotiate like that." That is why in the end these talks are going to break down.

DH: Well, I haven't been in the room for the negotiations. My understanding is that in fact both sides have entered into them in a good constructive spirit. And the truth is we need to find a way through. Any negotiated exit from the European Union involves a Withdrawal Agreement. So whatever we're going to do to move forward, actually we need to get through this phase. And as I say, I think the public actually expect us to be able to reach out across the party divide when that is needed in order to do things in the national interest.

AM: The talks go on this week and we can't prejudge them, obviously. But if they break down there's no plan B left at all. Given the numbers, then you are completely scuppered as a government. You have no way forward on Brexit at all, do you?

DH: Well, look, I hope the talks will find progress, but actually there is a potential alternative, which has always been clear, that then, you know, the government would come back to Parliament with a series of votes to try and find a stable majority. But it is true – I mean, you're right, you need to have not only a majority but a stable majority to be able to pass this legislation through Parliament, it's not just one vote. You know, we've got to pass the Withdrawal Agreement Bill through Parliament in order to be able to move to the next stage.

AM: You've been a very loyal member of the Cabinet. There aren't many of them. But nonetheless, when you hear George Osborne say it is time to face reality and for members of the Cabinet to tell Theresa May her time is up, don't you agree with him?

DH: Look, I don't think actually this is about the position of the Prime Minister and the leader of the party. This is about the

maths in the – you know, in our parliamentary party and indeed in Parliament itself. I think the Prime Minister has shown the most remarkable tenacity and drive and commitment in seeing through this process which has been very difficult.

AM: But look at the political consequences.

DH: Yeah, sure but hard negotiations with Europe, and at the same time having to deal with all the negotiations at home. I think she's done a remarkable job and no one should be under any illusion that just changing the person in that position would actually – would change the parliamentary reality.

AM: Okay. Let's move to your primary responsibility which is schools in England. There's been a big front page story on The Times this week you'll have seen, private schools very very upset and very angry about the success of state schools in getting their pupils into Oxford and Cambridge at the expense of expensively educated private school children. And one head teacher, from Stowe I think it was, has described this as 'social engineering.'

DH: Well I don't think that's an appropriate phrase and I do celebrate more state school children you know having the opportunity to go to top universities like Oxford and Cambridge. I think that's a great thing. It's at the heart of my philosophy, you know, trying to promote social mobility and that where you come from shouldn't dictate where you end up.

AM: So your message to the private schools is suck it up?

DH: No, my message to the private schools is you know actually our private schools in this country are also world famous. They do a great job. But I want to have opportunity widely spread and I don't want the fact that somebody hasn't had a private education, which of course is the overwhelming majority of children in this

country, 93% have not, they need to have an absolutely fair crack at the whip and I'm really pleased that they do.

AM: You are in charge of a department which in turn is in charge of all the maths departments and the numbers across the country in the schools. Are you embarrassed that the UK Statistics Authority has written to you five times in the past 18 months complaining and worried about your department's use of statistics? Something serious has gone wrong, hasn't it?

DH: Well statistics obviously play an important part in our public debate and it's good that we have the UK Statistics Authority monitoring these things. Obviously you never want to be -

AM: You don't sound embarrassed.

DH: - you never want to be you know the person who is criticised. Actually I mean I don't think this has been in the main about saying numbers are wrong, sometimes there's a complaint about the political and other contexts.

AM: I'm sorry, this is serious: "Dear Secretary of State, I am writing to raise with you serious concerns about the Department for Education's presentation and use of statistics," says Sir David Norgrove, Chair of the Statistics Authority. And then he lists a whole series of things where you've presented them wrong. The international comparisons of spending, Ofsted rankings, National Pupil Census, per pupil funding, National Funding Formula and so on. This must be embarrassing for the department.

DH: No, those things aren't incorrect. There has been some debate, and that's perfectly legitimate, about how you present these things contextually, but if you talk about international comparisons for example, you know if you compare spending on education in this country compared to other G7 countries we have

the - you know we are at the same level or higher than other G7 countries apart from the United States. It is true –

AM: And we can trust your numbers, can we?

DH: - go and check them up on the OECD website. It is also true that there's a higher proportion of children now in schools most recently rated good or outstanding.

AM: Damian Hinds, thanks very much for coming to talk to us.

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